

# SUBSISTENCE MYTHS

## What Have You Heard?

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What have you heard about subsistence in Alaska? There are so many misconceptions about subsistence in casual conversation that we've begun to call them myths. We have heard people say, "Subsistence is for Natives only." "Subsistence takes most of the fish and game." "Subsistence is just welfare." "Subsistence is bad for wildlife conservation." "Subsistence is disappearing." In fact, the subsistence we know is very different. Here is a short quiz about subsistence in Alaska. See if what you have heard is fact or fancy.

### Is subsistence for Natives only?

No. Under both state and federal law, both Alaska Natives and non-Natives may hunt and fish for subsistence.

Of course, there is always an exception. Marine mammal hunting is regulated by international treaty and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Only Alaska Natives may hunt marine mammals, such as seals, whales, polar bears, and sea otters.

### Does "subsistence" mean hunting and fishing for food?

Certainly food is one of the most important subsistence uses of wild resources. The current rural subsistence harvest is about 375 pounds of food per person per year. That is more than the U.S. average consumption of 255 pounds of domestic meat, fish, and poultry per year. (The average American uses a total of 1,371 pounds of all foods a year.) However, there are other important uses of subsistence products, such as:

- **Clothing:** Wild furs and hides are still the best materials for ruffs (wind guards), mitts, parkas, kuspüks, clothes lining, and mukluks (winter boots) in many regions.
- **Fuel:** Wood is a major source of energy in rural homes, and is used for smoking and preserving fish and meat.
- **Transportation:** Fish, seals, and other products are used to feed dog teams.
- **Construction:** Spruce, birch, hemlock, willow, and cottonwood are used for house logs, sleds, fish racks, and innumerable other items.

- **Home goods:** Hides are used as sleeping mats. Seal skins are used as pokes to store food. Wild grasses are made into baskets and mats.
- **Sharing:** Fish and wildlife are widely given out to support neighbors who cannot harvest for themselves because of age, disability, or other circumstances.
- **Customary trade:** Specialized products like seal oil are bartered and exchanged in traditional trade networks between communities. Furs sold to outside markets provide an important source of income to many rural areas.
- **Ceremony:** Traditional products are used in funerals, potlatches, marriages, Native dances, and other ceremonial occasions.
- **Arts and Crafts:** Ivory, grass, wood, skins, and furs are crafted into beautiful items for use and sale.

All of these uses of wild resources are recognized and protected in law. Subsistence is a rich pattern of living, of which food is but one important part.

### **Is big game (like moose or caribou) the main subsistence food?**

As a general rule, no. The main subsistence food is fish. About 60 percent of the state's subsistence harvest by weight is fish, including salmon, halibut, herring, whitefish, cod, and Arctic char-Dolly Varden, among others. Land mammals are only about 20 percent of the state's subsistence catch. Marine mammals are 14 percent of the catch, and "other resources" are 6 percent (mostly clams, crabs, birds, berries, and plants).

Of course, the types of foods people eat vary from place to place. Fish is a smaller item in the extreme coastal arctic areas, where caribou, seal, whale, and walrus are major subsistence resources.

### **Does subsistence take most of the fish and game?**

Again, as a general rule, no. Commercial fishing outstrips subsistence many times. In the 1990s in Alaska, commercial fisheries harvested on average about 1.2 billion lbs. of salmon, halibut, herring, shellfish (there was an additional commercial groundfish harvest of 4.1 billion lbs.) This compares with a harvest of 43,714,606 lbs. of subsistence foods and 9,740,012 lbs. of sport-caught fish and game. Thus, in recent years commercial fish took 96 percent, subsistence took three percent, and sport took one percent of the total statewide harvest (excluding commercial groundfish).

Of course, these proportions vary by area. In the areas with roads, the sport harvest is usually larger than the subsistence harvest. In the areas without roads, the subsistence harvest is larger than the sport harvest. But commercial fishing is the clear leader in overall volume.

## **Does subsistence involve money?**

Yes. Rural families use money in order to purchase basic goods and services: fuel oil and electricity for heat, light, and power; family goods like clothing and shelter; subsistence equipment like guns, ammunition, fishing nets, power motors, gasoline, rain gear, and so forth. Money is used to invest in the tools for hunting, fishing, and gathering.

It is a common misconception that there is no money in traditional subsistence economies. However, trade and commerce have always been part of subsistence systems. Goods have been traded for thousands of years in Alaska. The commercial fur trade with European markets began about 300 years ago, bringing European currencies and goods into Alaska. So commercial enterprise and money have been part of traditional subsistence economies for a long time.

Rural Alaska's economies do operate differently from urban economies, however. In Alaska today, the rural economies are "mixed economies," where families and communities live by combining wild resource harvests with commercial-wage employment. Monetary jobs tend to be few and unstable. Monetary incomes tend to be small and insecure. Economic activity tends to occur in family groups, rather than business firms. Economic ventures tend to be small scale. Economic goals tend to be for the benefit of family groups, rather than monetary profits for business firms. These are major differences. Because of this, Alaska is a pluralistic society, with "mixed subsistence-cash economies" existing side-by-side with the "industrial capital economy" of the large population centers of Anchorage and Fairbanks.

## **Is subsistence compatible with wildlife conservation?**

Rural communities depend on the land for subsistence. It is to their advantage to maintain undamaged land and ecosystems, so wildlife are abundant. Most subsistence communities have customary rules for treating the land and the ecosystem. These rules have been passed on through the generations: "Do not waste," "Take only what is needed," "Treat the animals with respect," "Do not damage the land without cause," among others. It is believed that if the rules are followed, then the land will continue to provide. Subsistence peoples are the original conservationists, although they may not use that word, because their very lives depend on it.

This is not to say there is perfect compliance with customary rules, as with any group of people. However, today most people still comply with the traditional rules and practices. They comply, even when there are additional government rules and regulations governing land and resource uses. In fact, rural areas commonly must

obey two sets of laws -- those from the state-federal administration, and those handed down from their forefathers as customary law.

Federal law recognizes the compatibility of subsistence and wilderness values. The law protects subsistence uses in the new parklands, national refuges, and wilderness areas. Subsistence peoples and traditional uses are part of the natural ecosystem and have helped to maintain it for generations.

### **Is subsistence compatible with wilderness?**

Yes. Most areas designated as "wilderness" today are the traditional homelands of subsistence peoples. Alaskans have been living in and using these areas for thousands of years, and continue to do so. These areas would not appear pristine and undamaged today -- so they could be classified as wilderness -- if rural Alaskans had not treated the lands and wildlife well. The lands are wilderness now, because subsistence is compatible with wilderness.

### **Is subsistence a type of welfare for families with low incomes?**

No. Subsistence is not a welfare system for people with low incomes. In fact, households with the highest incomes in rural communities usually produce the most subsistence foods. Households with the lowest incomes usually produce less subsistence foods.

This makes sense if subsistence is seen as a family enterprise. Households with the lowest incomes in the community are commonly the very elderly, single mothers with young dependent children, and young single persons or young couples who are just getting started. These households also very likely cannot subsistence fish and hunt very well. They often lack the time, the labor, and the equipment to harvest effectively. They usually eat subsistence foods produced by other households in the community.

The households who produce the most subsistence foods in a community are usually households with large, mature labor forces that have equipment for hunting and fishing. Usually, these are households with mature parents and several mature children. They have the labor and equipment to harvest wild foods. They typically produce extra subsistence food to share with elderly relatives, the less fortunate, and young adults. The mature households also usually have greater monetary incomes because there may be several household members with jobs.

Because of this, rural communities would suffer extreme hardship if subsistence hunting and fishing were limited to only households with low incomes. This would cut out the most productive households in the community.

## **Why don't subsistence hunters use bows and arrows?**

Subsistence requires equipment that works, is safe, and is sustainable with ecological and economic conditions over the long term. Most people stopped using bows and arrows over a century ago in Alaska. Rural Alaska has been using guns for hunting longer than America has been using automobiles for transportation, since the 1860s in most areas.

Subsistence equipment is usually small scale, appropriate technology. It is efficient and modern. Equipment commonly includes fish nets, fish wheels, aluminum skiffs with small out-boards, snowmachines, binoculars, and citizens band radios. These may be used alongside dog teams, skin boats, smoke houses, and fish traps, depending upon the areas and conditions.

## **Is subsistence disappearing?**

Subsistence is constantly changing, but as a whole, there is little evidence that it is disappearing as a way of life in Alaska. In rural Alaska, subsistence activities are among the most highly valued parts of the culture. Subsistence harvests still are essential parts of the rural economy. In most rural places, children continue to learn how to capture wild foods and prepare them for use by the family and community.

Nevertheless, some things do threaten subsistence. Roads into rural areas usually result in declines in the subsistence way of living. Roads bring about ecological change, increased competition for wild resources, and in-migration of cultural groups that do not hunt and fish for subsistence. Unregulated commercial harvesting that depletes stocks and game populations has resulted in declines in subsistence in certain areas in Alaska. Examples of this include commercial whaling and commercial walrus hunting in the Arctic, and commercial salmon traps in southeast Alaska. Unreasonably restrictive rules which limit access to traditional harvest areas or species may threaten subsistence over time. The new state and federal subsistence laws were intended to help bring about regulations beneficial to the subsistence way of life. In general, any change that depletes wild resources, reduces access to wild areas and resources, or increases competition between user groups can create problems for subsistence.

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